Nature of Thought

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:48

This is one of my favorite topics because it so universally concerns all of us: the nature of thought. I find this particular aspect of life fascinating.

I want to start by reading the first two verses of the Dhammapada, which is one of the books of the sayings of the Buddha, about just how powerful thought can be—in case you didn't already recognize that.

We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with an impure mind and trouble will follow you as the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart. We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you as your shadow, unshakable.

Now, if you think that the Buddha is speaking not in hyperbole but actually just stating what is so—that we are what we think, and all that we are arises with our thoughts—that's an extremely radical statement. What I want to talk about today is really how true that is, and how much of our confusion and suffering comes not from the thoughts themselves, but from our not understanding the nature of thought itself. From taking thought to be something other than it is, something much greater. By giving it a power it doesn't need to have through our not understanding it.

Thought is obviously really important to us. It's an amazing tool, a powerful ally in the world. Just that we can sit here and communicate—that I can move my mouth and my vocal cords and make noises, and it means something to you, hopefully. Or if someone were up here speaking in Swahili, the same process would occur, but we don't have the same agreement as to what the thoughts mean, so it doesn't make any sense. Thought is really useful, incredibly important.

But how much of our life, or how much of our practice, can end up feeling like it's a struggle against thoughts? How often do you find yourself—and maybe you don't, but I know I often do, and it certainly comes up in talking with people—slipping into: if I could just get rid of thoughts, if I could just stop thinking, then practice could really happen. Then maybe I could know my true nature. If only thoughts would go away. And it gets into such a struggle.

But if we look at just thought itself, when we talk about thought as another phenomenon appearing in the vast space of awareness—just like a sound, just like a sensation—what is a thought? It just comes and goes. "It's evening." "The rug is pink." "My back hurts." "I'm a really bad meditator." Can that one just come and go too? When it doesn't, when we stop seeing it as just thought arising in space, that's when all the seeming trouble starts.

Basically, through misunderstanding, through misperceiving the simple nature of thoughts, we're spending the greater part of our lives creating an incredibly complex world of dream and illusion, living in it, fighting against it, and suffering because of it—through not knowing its true nature.

Remember the quotation from Kalu Rinpoche that Howie used, and I think Jack also used it: "We live in illusion and the appearance of things. You are a reality. There is a reality. You are that reality." Well, the illusion and the appearance of things is largely created through our misunderstanding, our misperception of thought, and our sometimes rapid reactions to it.

I think I mentioned sometime in this retreat how surprised Asian teachers often are by how much we think. When you go into an interview sometimes with an Asian teacher—with Sayadaw U Pandita, for example—you can just sense this feeling of bewilderment that we can't come in and just say a simple thing like, "I experienced pressure arising and noticed it getting stronger." It turns into this whole story: "There's this pressure in my left knee, and it has something to do with the way I sit, and I remember an accident I had in my childhood, and perhaps..." And we go on. It's like this. Pressure can't just experience pressure. There's just this real bewilderment about what a story we make up. And we really believe it. We will often fight to the death anyone who challenges us to see it as a story. "This is true!"

Something we often suggest, just as an experiment, is to get a feeling for the ephemeral nature of thought. It comes, it goes. Like Joseph likes to say, it's just a bubble. Where did it come from? Where did it go? When it goes, notice that space between thoughts that it comes out of. So sometimes we'll suggest: in a sitting, try imagining that every thought that arises comes from the person behind you. Try it in your next sitting. It really gives a good sense that the trouble isn't with the thought. I'm serious—try it.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said once, in talking about thoughts, that when we look closely we see that our mind is seething with thoughts. And it's true—the more we look, the more seething it seems to be. He goes on to say, and this is where we often stop looking: "A becalmed mind is not a peaceful mind. This is a peace that's very brittle. What you're calling peace is only an absence of disturbance." Maybe we'll settle for absence of disturbance sometimes, but it doesn't really go very far. True peace cannot be disturbed.

If true peace only meant an absence of thought, then does that mean that the whole rest of our life, when thoughts are arising, peace is impossible? Peace is inaccessible? That's unacceptable to me. Truth cannot be dependent on the absence or presence of anything, and that includes thought.

So a lot of our challenge, I feel, is to begin to understand a thought as a thought, and also how it is that we get so carried away in thought—that it builds up such a world of illusion and confusion that we take to be so real, so real that we come to equate the presence of thought with suffering.

One place where our confusion, our misunderstanding of thought, sort of begins—where thought kind of begins in the process—is on the basic level of perception. Perception, meaning in this context the simple quality of recognition of something. In the Buddhist psychology, perception arises in every moment

whenever there's a sense contact. Perception is this quality of recognition, of discernment as such. It involves memory. So for example, I know seeing, and I can recognize this as a rug, or as pink. We see each other and we perceive a person; we perceive a male or a female; we perceive someone that we know. This is all perception. I perceive this as a hand.

The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. On this bare level of perception, it's really fascinating. This is, I believe, why the emphasis in our mindfulness practice is so much on simple, direct experience. Why one of the definitions of mindfulness is knowing what's arising in a moment accurately. Because so often we are reacting from a mistaken perception.

I'll give you an example. What is a mistaken perception, and how do they arise? Basically, it's recognizing incorrectly. If I were to say this rug is green, that would be a mistaken perception. Someone who's colorblind would have what they thought was the correct perception of a green rug, but in our common agreement, that perception is incorrect.

So in our ongoing moment-to-moment process of perceiving different experience, the three roots of confusion, the three roots of suffering that we were talking about this morning—the arising in the mind of blindness or ignorance, the arising of greed and wanting, or the arising of what's called hatred but is really aversion, pushing away—when in the moment of perception one of those is arising, it tends to distort our recognition. We perceive wrongly, and we don't know it.

Someone last year told me that she was walking up to the preceptory here in a really foul mood, having had a really dismal day. Walking into it, she looked at the sign that said "preceptory" and actually read "purgatory." That's a mistaken perception, fueled in that moment by aversion. But that one was easily corrected—she could go back and see that it said preceptory. Yet this is happening to us all the time, and we don't know it. We think what we're seeing is true. We're not noticing the mistaken perception, and that leads to our opinions, our conclusions, our reactions. Before we know it, we're in a whole gestalt of activity that is so far away from what's actually happening.

That's why mindfulness is so insistent: come back to the bare experience, the bare perception, and see what's so. We get so far away in no time. You can all think of, if you really consider it, hundreds of examples in any day. This is what we're doing, creating this dream over and over.

An example that comes to my mind is from when I was in Vancouver, staying in a friend's apartment. It was at night, and my friend was in another friend's apartment, so I was there alone, sort of falling asleep around ten or eleven o'clock. In that state when you've just fallen asleep, some loud noise woke me up—that moment when you don't have your usual storyline going yet. I just heard these sounds. They were like booming sounds. They sounded like shelling or something, and in fact, my mind immediately turned it into machine gun fire.

I was lying there, and it kept happening. Machine gun fire. That was the perception, the recognition, and it

got locked in really quickly so that there wasn't a freshness of just being with the bare sound. From machine gun fire, the mind went into a whole story: "Well, that's impossible on the streets of Vancouver, there's no reason... Well, it could happen in Beirut. What makes you think if it happens in Beirut it couldn't happen in Vancouver?" I started getting images of guys in fatigues running door-to-door, shooting machine guns at each other. I was really getting out there. I leapt out of bed.

I turned on the radio to see if there was some kind of war going on in Vancouver. There was of course nothing on the radio. I looked out the window; the streets were just dead empty. And it was really escalating and quite real. If I had had any other perception that could have strengthened my belief that there was some kind of war going on in the streets of Vancouver, I would have believed it. Fortunately for me, absolutely no following perception strengthened that. I could see people watching TV in the apartments across the street, and I thought, "Well, I guess there's not a war." I never did find out what was going on. But this is how far and how fast we can get.

Wanting in the mind, or in this case fear in the mind, ignorance in the mind—it completely distorts our perception of what is happening. Like Jack said the other night, the Indian saying: when a pickpocket meets a saint, the pickpocket only sees the saint's pockets. Wanting distorts perception. So does aversion. So does fear. So does blindness. We don't know what's happening. This is going on, I must say, for a lot of us in the greater part of our moment-to-moment experience. When we're not looking, when we're not investigating, we're taking stuff for granted, acting on it, responding to it, and wondering why our lives can feel so confused, why when we talk to someone else our experiences don't seem to match exactly.

The real root cause of our basic misperception is this quality of blindness that we were speaking about this morning—usually translated as ignorance, but I like blindness better. It also arises moment to moment in our experience. It's not monolithic, here since beginningless time while we're chipping away at it, a little chip, a little chip, a little chip. It really arises moment to moment when the conditions are there, and when the conditions are not there, it also passes away.

What's interesting about ignorance is that we can learn to recognize its presence in a moment of our experience in the same way that we can recognize aversion, or recognize wanting, or recognize sleepiness. It's very helpful, I think, to begin to recognize this quality of blindness. Because then we often know—we can go to the next step and know—well, it's a good bet I might not be completely perceiving the situation accurately. And just give it a little space.

When ignorance is present, it clouds discernment, and that's one of the ways it feels—this experience of cloudiness, of dullness. You're not going to have that really pristine clarity of mindfulness when ignorance is present, because its function is that it clouds things. The way I think of it when I'm trying to feel it, really to get a sense of what it's like experientially, is like sometimes when I'm waking up in the morning. I've slept kind of late, or I've slept too warm, and there's this sense of knowing it's time to wake up and trying to wake up. In the sleep, you're trying to wake up but can't quite get there. When that happens to me,

everything seems upside down, and I can't quite tell what's going on. There's this sense of knowing something's off, but not being able to be any clearer about it. I don't know if that makes sense, but that's how blindness feels to me—this kind of cloud of confusion and dullness.

When it's present, it gives rise, as I've said, to misperception. And the basic misperception is that of wrong view, that of not knowing what is so. The basic wrong view that most of us operate under is the wrong view of who and what we truly are.

Let me give a more simple example of how ignorance gives rise to misperception and wrong view, and acting out of that misperception. This is the classic example given in a lot of the Buddhist texts: walking in the forest, like in Thailand where there are lots of snakes, lots of poisonous snakes—cobras and such. It's dusk, and you can't see clearly. That's the confusion mode, the blindness mode, that time of dusk when you can sort of see and you think you can see better than you really can.

Walking through the woods, you come upon a snake coiled in the path. It's really sudden and really scary. It gives rise to a lot of fear—the sense of "What am I doing out at night without a flashlight?" which in Thailand is literally risking your life, because if you step on a poisonous snake and you don't know what it is, you can really die. Seeing a snake can give rise to a lot of fear, which then gives rise to further thoughts about the unsafety of the forest, or one's own foolishness for coming out without a torch, and a sense of "Just let me get out of here, I'm never going back"—a whole proliferation of story around that.

Then you go back in the daytime and see that that coiled snake was just a rope that somebody had left lying there. It's a whole different story. When the perception is accurate—oh well, there's nothing to be afraid of, it's just a rope—all the fear and all the personal reactions and all the way that we responded changes completely.

So you can see from that how our fears and assumptions, our conclusions about what is true, arise so quickly from our basic perception. And when that perception is incorrect, all the basic assumptions and conclusions that we're acting on, that we're basing our understanding of life on, are not accurate.

This is going on all the time in our basic perception of who we are, perceiving ourselves as this mind, this body. Ongoing basic misperception that gives rise to so much confusion, to wanting, to aversion, to separation—deep basic misperception. Out of the constant arising and passing of sense data, as you sit, as you walk, what's the experience? It's one sense perception after another: hearing, seeing, sensation in the body, another sensation, thinking, an emotion, hearing, seeing, smelling, touching, tasting, thinking. It's just the same six sense perceptions over and over and over—maybe different specific sense perceptions, but the same six senses.

Out of this basic sense data coming and going, coming and going, we organize it through our misperception, through our thoughts about it, our assumptions and conclusions about the sense data. We create a whole inaccurate idea—and maybe not even a conscious idea—of who and what we are, and then

we suffer from it.

They talk about three inverted perceptions, or three upside-down perceptions, that are the ongoing support for our mistaken idea of who we are. We've spoken of these a lot; you'll recognize them. The first one is that we take what is impermanent and constantly changing to be unchanging. We don't see the change. That's really fairly obvious.

As I just said, this constant flow of changing sensations—we take it to be one solid train of thought, for example, or one solid body sitting here. And when we really look, it's just sensation after sensation arising. There's nothing solid there. But we take it to be solid and unchanging.

The second upside-down perception follows on this first one. Once we think there's something unchanging here, we are looking for happiness where it can't be found. In other words, what is changing and unsatisfactory, we're looking there for lasting peace, for lasting happiness, and we don't see that it can't be found here. This is what keeps us looking in the wrong direction for peace, for truth, for beauty.

And of course, both of these lead to the third upside-down perception, which is thinking or seeing or feeling that there's a solid self here—a solid, unchanging, everlasting self—when in fact there isn't one. This is the place where, as much as we might want to believe that there's not a solid self, most everything in our unquestioned experience leads us to continue to believe and continue to act from the strong conviction that there is a solid self.

It's like when Howie was speaking the other night, having us turn our attention into questioning it. It's exactly this—it's such an unquestioned assumption that we don't even know we're making the assumption. We don't think to even question it, never mind bringing our attention back to the basic perception that gave rise to that assumption in the first place.

Some misperceptions are easy to see through. For instance, that one of "percolatory"—just come and look at the sign and it's really clear. Once you've seen through a confused perception like that, it's so obvious you can never imagine how you didn't see it before, and you don't usually make the same mistake again. Unfortunately, others aren't quite so simple and easy to see through.

Or it's more that so much is happening so fast. For instance, the sense that there is no solid mind and body here—it seems solid. It seems like I'm the same mind and body, pretty much, that I was yesterday. When I look in the mirror I recognize myself. And if I look at a picture of me when I was two, I sure don't look the same, but I feel like I've not changed at all—I'm the same person that I was then. Oh, that's so obviously ridiculous if you look at the facts.

It's sort of like everything's happening so fast in the mind and the body, this flow of sense experience. I can't even speak as fast as it's happening. Hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, cognizing. Hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, cognizing. According to the Buddha—and translated into modern language—each perception can happen in one thought moment, and there are seventeen trillion thought moments in the

blink of an eye. It's really fast. Is it no wonder we don't see through it?

I think it's sort of like recently someone showed me a color photograph—just of whatever—and had me look at it through a magnifying glass. I had never seen this before, but it just resolves into four different colors of dots. That's all it is, just all these little dots put together. And when we look at it without the magnifying glass, it's this solid photograph of a landscape or a person. It's just exactly the same.

Mindfulness is really our magnifying glass here. When we turn it on to our actual experience, moment to moment to moment, when we really examine—not even our assumptions—but coming back to the bare experience moment to moment, we start to see the sense of solidity break up. Or more what it is, is that we start to see what's really happening, free of our concepts and interpretations about it. If we really paid attention, we would see that everything was changing all the time. It's just that we get so lost in our interpretations. We take what we think is true so for granted that we don't even question, we don't even inquire.

I've read this before, but it's so appropriate—Nisargadatta: "We miss the real by lack of attention and create the unreal by excess of imagination." And we're just sitting here doing that all the time. Excess of imagination and lack of attention.

And when, in the process of simply being, without all the extra interpretation, without believing all the interpretation—just being, hearing, or spaciousness, sensation, thought, it doesn't matter what phenomenon is appearing—we're not identifying with it, simply being. It's so obvious when there's a moment of no ignorance. It's so obvious that we're not this thought, that this thought is not an accurate reflection of who I am, that I'm not this sensation or this sound, that everything's coming and going and I'm not any of it. What is true is just so painfully obvious, so apparent, and we think there's nothing to do. It's so simple. It just is. How could I ever have missed this?

Just like with seeing the signs as "percolatory." Only it seems this particular clarity of perception—or rather, the misperception of who we are—arises again so easily because things are happening, as I said, so quickly. Somehow we drift out of that clarity of seeing, another sense experience arises, another perception arises, and we don't see it clearly and we're off again on a whole other creation. What had been so clear that we can't imagine ever not living in that space becomes, in that moment, as if it's just a memory.

Or sometimes, in the space of just spaciousness, of clarity, of no story being constructed, it's so simple—and sometimes fear comes up. "Well, what about if I'm not really here? How am I going to go to work after the retreat if I'm not really here?" How many times does that start? "If there's no self, then..."—and you can add whatever particular thing we think we won't be able to do.

Nothing changes. What can change? It's not here in the first place, so we're not losing anything. The only thing that changes is our relationship to experience. But otherwise, nothing changes. The fear is again

coming from a misperception, from a confused notion.

How we understand our experience informs all of our responses to it, all the ways that we behave. A very simple example—it's not from seeing no-self, but it's just an example of how we interpret experience and how that inspires how we behave. A yogi told me on a retreat last summer that he was really noticing this. He would get certain sensations, just kind of prickly little sensations all over, like a fly landing all over him—which I'm sure many of you have had that experience here. And when in his mind he knew it was a fly, there was a lot of aversion, a lot of restlessness. It was very difficult to deal with. But then he started noticing that in certain—to him, what he defined as—very concentrated states, he would get exactly the same experience of these little pricklings all over that felt exactly like a fly walking on him. So if he thought it was from concentration, well, it was fine. He really liked it. It was no problem at all to deal with.

If he thought it was fly feet walking all over him, a lot of aversion arose. The experience itself, the actual sense experience, is just what it is. It's no problem. It's pleasant or it's unpleasant, no matter. The way that we interpret it is what creates the struggle or the sense of ease in being with it.

One of the ways that confusion, that blindness, works to continue us in our misperception—once we've made an original misperception of who we are—is that we use the thoughts that arise quite naturally to describe and define our experience. For instance, "the flies walking all over me." We take that experience, that definition, to be accurate. And then, without continuing to examine, we think, "Well, now I know what's so." With that certainty, our future perceptions become skewed, so that very often we don't even acknowledge or recognize perceptions that don't fit with the story we've made up. We've rigged it so that we're never going to see anything other than what we think to be so.

This is one of the things we do with impermanence. We all know it intellectually. We all nod. But the way that we live our lives is somehow never thinking we'll get old, being really shocked when something goes wrong with our body, being really shocked at the thought of death, being really shocked when a new pain comes up. "What's this pain doing here? I was feeling so good!" We don't really let it in.

A couple of examples, even on a more basic level, of how we construct a definition and then disallow any information that would challenge it. It happens often in meditation where people will get some idea of good concentration. Good meditation means when a particular phenomenon arises, the attention can really land on it, can focus on it and stay with it for a long time. "I should be able to stay with the breath for half an hour. When pain arises, just be able to stay with that pain and really explore it. Stay with that emotion and really explore it." That's the idea, the perception that gets locked in.

People often will come and say, "Well, you know, concentration is no good. As soon as I notice the pain, I just can't stay with it—it goes away. I notice the emotion; it dissolves, it goes away. I just can't hold on to it. The concentration is no good."

Let go of this self-definition and look at what's actually happening. Things are changing really quickly.

That's how it is. No one can hold on to things when they're really changing. But instead of just seeing what we see, we twist it to fit our self-definition, and then we suffer.

Or consider how often we make up a particular definition of ourselves for that day, or that year, or this lifetime. "I'm such an aversive person." "I'm such a kind person." "I can't do this meditation; I never could and I never will be able to." "I'm an incredibly great yogi." "I'm a mother." Whatever our particular self-definition is.

And then notice how all the different thoughts that arise from all our different perceptions—how many there are that have absolutely nothing to do with that self-definition. "I'm such an angry person." Has every moment of your day been angry? How about all the moments of peace, or just enjoying the lunch, or just having a sense of pleasure looking at the owls, or a sense of sleepiness, or just calmness, or boredom, or fear? Many, many, many experiences. And out of that, we take the ones that fit our perception and don't pay much attention to the others if they don't bolster our idea.

Often, especially, we tend to glom onto the negative self-definitions. "I'm no good at this." And if something else arises—like half an hour of real joy and gratitude and happiness—we say, "Yeah, that's grace." But there's a twist to it. "That's grace. It fell from the sky. It has nothing to do with me, and it'll pass. But the real core of who I am is anger. The real core of who I am is this self-judgmental, negative person."

Somewhere, we don't give equal credence to all our perceptions. And look at that one anyway—the one about the core, "This core of who I am is anger." Like everything else is arising and passing, but somewhere in a core of nothing solid anywhere, there's a little rock of anger that's sitting, that's solid, that's who we are. Look at what we're thinking. Look at how we create this sense of confusion.

So even here, even with the sense of "I'm such an angry person," it's not the thoughts themselves that are the problem. That thought could arise and pass with as much of a bubble as "Today is Tuesday." It's allowing the thoughts to define reality. It's believing that that thought is an accurate description of who we are, and really giving it that power through aversion, through clinging, through identification.

Self-judgment, as an example, is so acutely painful mostly because we believe it—or we don't even notice it. We take that string of self-judgment to accurately define who we are, and then do our best to live up to it. Or else we fight it and hate it and say, "It's not who I am"—and that's the same thing. We're really believing it.

This misunderstanding—that it's the thoughts themselves, and not seeing where this power comes from, where this confusion comes from of believing them—this is what gives thought such amazing power. And this is where we can get so confused.

And one way to see our challenges: can we let go of self-definition altogether? Notice how as we go through the day there can be such an ongoing stream of talking to ourselves, describing our experience, defining who we are. Can we just let that be a stream of thoughts without holding on to it, without

believing that is our self-definition, without using it to define the world? Can we be with the bare experience just as it is, without getting so engrossed in the content of the thoughts?

That's our challenge, and that's the function of mindfulness. That's what we're learning how to do—simply coming back to bare experience. And as we all know, it's not a simple process. It's very subtle how quickly we get lost in the thoughts, how quickly we're believing what they say without recognizing that. But this willingness to come back to the bare experience without expectation, without a preconceived notion of what it means, just with an openness to explore, an openness to be present—this is what allows us the possibility to really know who and what we are. To really touch the truth, the spaciousness of what we are, unencumbered by thought. Thoughts not in the way, whether they're present or not present.

When we can have a moment of just being with the bare perception of hearing, of sensation, just peacefully there—that's when you can begin to notice, and this is what gets really fascinating to me, just how quickly the whole show can spring up out of nowhere. This is really what makes thought so powerful and why it's so easy to get lost in it. In that instant, that quick, we can go from bare perception to a whole world.

You can watch it in yourself. I watched it this morning in the 8:15 sitting. Do you remember there were a couple of loud booms? I didn't know what they were. I was very present, there was this boom in hearing, and then a moment of not-mindfulness, and within no time at all my mind had constructed an incredibly elaborate story of what those booms were. Moving from "an earthquake"—no, it couldn't be an earthquake from how it is other times, when the booms are different—to the marine base. Must be coming from the marine base, although it's different from last week when they were shelling. And from that into a whole construction of who I am in relationship to the Marines, what my opinion is of people who become Marines, and of Marines who are shelling in such an environmentally sensitive area as this desert. Within no time, from a bare experience of hearing—no problem—there was a really solid little reality created: me in all my self-righteousness versus the Marines who are jerks. In the blink of an eye, we're really solid and we really believe it.

This process of all this flow of thoughts is called papañca, which is a word that I love. Papañca is usually translated as proliferation, diversity. And it's just this: from one perception, an endless flow of associations and memories and thoughts and self-definition. It's how we get so far away from what is true when we don't see it as a process.

So I just want to talk briefly about what fuels this papañca, this proliferation. What energy gives it the strength that we get so lost in it, that it carries us so far?

Papañca is fueled by wrong view, which I spoke of—the sense of a separate "I." This is really, I think, the bottom line for most of our confusion. When I'm in that space—me and the Marines, "I"—there's a sense of separate self, and this is what gives rise to wanting, what gives rise to aversion. The sense of separation, the sense of discontent. You can see how all of that gives rise to more thought about how to fix it.

Papañca is also fueled by wanting, by craving. This is also pretty obvious, and you can explore it in your own practice—in a sitting, in a walking—over and over and over. Not by hating it, just by watching how there can be a moment of wanting that's not really experienced clearly as wanting. See how it fuels a whole show of thoughts and self-definition, leading to proliferation, even into action.

For example, someone told me about seeing an article of clothing on another yogi that she really liked. Wanting arises, and it gives rise to thoughts: I wonder where they got it, I wonder where I can get it. It can give rise to whole sittings of shopping sprees and comparing stores. It can give rise to writing notes to the other yogi and scheming of ways to find out, how to meet at the end of the retreat. It can actually give rise to the action of hopefully, when the retreat's over, getting in the car and going to the store to buy whatever this thing is.

This is the papañca, the proliferation of thought and more wanting leading to action, fueled by this energy of wanting. And not seeing the wanting, it just keeps going. As you know, we could just come back to the bare experience of wanting. Say, "wanting, wanting."

I remember one retreat I somehow got it in my head that I wanted pink shoes. And this was a two-month retreat. I spent so much time on that retreat scheming about these shoes and what they would go with and where I'd go get them. And then, you know, alternate times hating myself for being so stupid. And then it's over, you go to the store—I remember I went shopping and I looked—I don't want pink shoes. What's that all about? It's just wanting proliferating itself. There's nobody there.

We think these thoughts are a reflection of reality, though, and that's what's scary. Because they might or they might not be, but we really think they're true. On a large scale, I mean, it's funny when we're talking about pink shoes. But when we look at the world, this craving for whatever really proliferates—from wanting clothing, to wanting food, to wanting land, to wanting other people not to be on your land. It ends in a situation like with the Serbs and the Croats today. It's really scary to see how far the proliferation gets from the basic perception, from the wanting, and how solidly entrenched the views become, and how lost we get in that, and how far we'll go to get what we want.

Craving for becoming is another really powerful fuel for this energy of papañca, this energy of proliferation. Becoming, basically, is how we describe and define ourselves, moment to moment. Each time there's an identification with a particular experience, a particular thought, in that moment, that's what we become. There's a grasping, a becoming, and again, a whole little self-definition leading to suffering. Watch the process—it's fascinating. And see how quickly what we become can change and how much we believe each one.

It can come up a lot just in, say, walking meditation. Walking very slowly and mindfully, someone walks past more quickly—"I'm such a good yogi." In that moment we really identify, and it leads to more thoughts, more proliferation. "I'm such a good yogi. If I keep on doing this, maybe I'll go to Dharamsala and study with the Dalai Lama. Maybe I'll go and live in a cave there for a few years and practice tummo

yoga and come back and teach at Harvard. Or maybe I'll become a great guru…" And we give Dharma talks in our heads, and it goes on and on and on.

And we all do this. It's really solid. This is who I am.

Two minutes later – two seconds later – someone walks by that you've got in your mind pegged as the best yogi here. You just have to see them walk by. "Oh gosh, I could never do it the way they're doing it. If I had to walk that slowly, I might as well just give it up right now." And it goes on to our memories of all our failures in life, and this is just going to be another failure, and what's the point? It goes back to childhood and kindergarten and the fights we got into. "My older sister was always better than me anyway – she would have been able to do this. I'll just go off and wash dishes somewhere for the rest of my life. That's all I could do anyway." And that's really solid.

All we have to do is pay attention. It sounds so ridiculous, right? Unfortunately, on some level, this papañca, this craving for becoming, takes over. And without coming back to the bare experience, we're just off on the train. We really believe it.

What's the bare experience here? It was just seeing. Seeing, and a pleasant feeling arising. Seeing, and an unpleasant feeling arising. And then thoughts, memories, associations – but that's all they are: thoughts, memories, associations. It's not who you are.

The Buddha said once that if we're going to identify with either the mind or the body, it would be better for us to identify with the body, because the mind changes so much more quickly. But usually we reverse it. It's a little easier to see we're not the body.

So this is how we're making up the dream. We're making up reality, moment to moment, over and over. And instead of really turning around and inquiring – where's this coming from? What's the source of this? – we're simply believing each reality as it arises.

Once, a couple of years ago, I was on retreat. The sense that it's really true that thoughts are making up our reality – it's not just a nice metaphor; it's actually the case – became very clear. I was sitting in my room way back at the end of a corridor, and the thought came up: "I'm so alone here. I'm so lonely." In that particular tone.

Immediately following came this sense of sadness. The emotion was really present. And I was really quite mindful, so I was noting all of this – the emotion, the sense of "I live alone, I've been alone for so long, on this retreat in these back rooms here." You know, people could die and you wouldn't notice for three days until it started to stink or something. And it just went on and on, this deep grief.

But it was pretty mindful, and just the thought occurred: "Well, I'm making it all up. Let's just flip the story." So quite consciously I said, "You know, it's so wonderful to have this time to be alone." That was all.

Immediately there came up emotions of – wow – what gratitude to have two months to spend alone. "It's

so beautiful here." I noticed the beauty of the summer and the trees outside. There was a real joy, a real peace.

This is really amazing, because it's not just that I picked one thought. The thought led to a whole train of associations and emotions and identification, and it really felt solid. "This is me." It's as solid as it gets. Really fascinating.

That's when I really got it: we are making it all up. We are making it all up.

Sometimes we have the choice, and if we know we're making it up, sometimes we can make up a more pleasant one. There's nothing wrong with that. Someone told me once – I think it was Roger Walsh – that they read somewhere from *A Course in Miracles* that actually, to awaken to truth, in a way it's easier to awaken from a pleasant dream than from an unpleasant dream. So that's kind of nice. We have the choice. But most important is knowing that this is a dream, and knowing how it's being created, and being willing to come back and be with just what is.

And the key to being with just what is, is again this process of mindfulness, of wise attention.

So just quickly, to describe wise attention in working with the process of thoughts: it's being able to bring our attention to the source of the thought rather than running around in the content. A common example given is to think of a thought as if throwing a rock. The thought's kind of flying like the rock. Unwise attention is like a dog that gets hit by the rock and gets really upset and goes running around after the rock – following the thought, lost in it and fighting it. Wise attention is like a lion. If you throw a rock and hit a lion, it just ignores the rock and stares straight back at the thrower of the rock, at the source of the rock. It just cuts through and goes right back to the source.

That's wise attention. That's what we're cultivating here. And wise attention, in coming back to the source of the perception, the source of the thought, allows us to see, to know much more deeply that we are not thoughts – and much more than that.

So when you're in a constellation of a really difficult experience – pain in the body and tension in the mind and stories about it – I remember one story a teacher told where a man came in and said, "I have this tension in my jaw, and it's so painful, and it just shows me what a tense person I am, and how I've lived my whole life in a really rigid way, and how that's affected my family, and how I can never really be a kind person."

And so the teacher said, "Oh, you mean there's tension in your jaw?"

He said, "Yeah, and I'm such a rigid person, and I'm so uptight..." This went on for like three or four times.

Where is the tension when we come back? There's tension. It's unpleasant. That's all. Can we just deal with that? And notice the interpretations and the associations – they can come, they can go. It's all extra.

Forget the story.

Come back to what's really happening.

And when we're willing and able to remember, to bring wise attention, to be with what's really happening, it's so simple that it's awesome. The truth of who we are, the truth of our life is so simple we can't believe it. Because it's got nothing to do with thought, being or not being. It's so simple.

My favorite stanza from the Buddha—he's describing this to a man, and he told this man just this one stanza. Immediately after, the man was killed by a wild cow, but the Buddha said that's okay, this stanza was enough. He got it.

And so it's this: In the seen, there is only the seen. In the heard, there is only the heard. In the smelled, there is only the smelled. In the tasted, there is only the tasted. In what is felt and what is sensed, there is only that sensing. In what is cognized or felt with the mind, there is only that cognizance, nothing else.

That is all.

And that was the stanza of the Buddha. That is all.

Can we be that simple? Can you deal with pressure, and that is all? No problem, no me, no suffering.

Let's just sit for a minute.

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